

Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development

Karen E. Johnson

The Pennsylvania State University

Paula R. Golombek

The Pennsylvania State University



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Contents

List of contributors	vii
Series editor's preface	ix
Preface	xi

- 1 Inquiry into experience: Teachers' personal and professional growth 1
Karen E. Johnson and Paula R. Golombek

Part I INQUIRY INTO INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES 15

- | | |
|--|----|
| Initial reflection | 17 |
| 2 "And now for something completely different": Personal meaning making for secondary ESL students . . . and their teacher 18
<i>Pauline A. G. Johansen</i> | |
| 3 Putting theory into practice: Letting my students learn to read 35
<i>Lynne Doherty Herndon</i> | |
| 4 Rewriting is more than just writing again 52
<i>Patricia Sackville</i> | |
| 5 Action for understanding: A study in teacher research with exploratory practice 60
<i>Kimberly A. Johnson</i> | |
| Discussion, reflection, and action | 73 |
| Suggested readings | 75 |

Part II INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE LEARNERS 77

- | | |
|--|----|
| Initial reflection | 79 |
| 6 Who is in this classroom with me? 80
<i>Suzanne House</i> | |

vi *Contents*

- 7 Talking at length and depth: Learning from focus group discussions 91
Bob Gibson
- 8 My learning through journaling: Forgiveness as a source of power and the communication of voice in the classroom 108
Jennifer L. Esbenschade
- 9 Understanding our students' families: The hidden community of international wives 118
Linda Winston and Laurie Soltman
- Discussion, reflection, and action 131
- Suggested readings 132

Part III INQUIRY INTO LANGUAGE TEACHERS 133

- Initial reflection 135
- 10 A tale of names 136
Ling Shi
- 11 Seeking satisfaction 150
Kazuyoshi Sato
- 12 The art of drawing theory: A teacher's personal and professional sense making 163
Tobie Robison
- Discussion, reflection, and action 175
- Suggested readings 176

Part IV INQUIRY THROUGH PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATIONS 177

- Initial reflection 179
- 13 What I learnt from giving quiet children space 180
Michael Boshell
- 14 Talking ourselves into understanding 195
Steve Mann
- Discussion, reflection, and action 211
- Suggested readings 212

Contributors

Michael Boshell, Higher Colleges of Technology, Abu Dhabi Women's College, United Arab Emirates

Jennifer L. Esbenshade, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

Bob Gibson, Keio University, Japan

Paula R. Golombek, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

Lynne Doherty Herndon, The Manhattan International School, New York

Suzanne House, Lakeland College, Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Pauline A. G. Johansen, Principal, Richmond School District, British Columbia

Karen E. Johnson, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

Kimberly A. Johnson, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Ling Shi, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

Steve Mann, Language Studies Unit, Aston University, England

Tobie Robison, Boone High School, Orlando, Florida

Patricia Sackville, British Columbia Institute of Technology, Burnaby

Kazuyoshi Sato, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Aichi, Japan

Laurie Soltman, Florida Marlins Baseball Club, Florida

Linda Winston, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

1 Inquiry into experience

Teachers' personal and professional growth

Karen E. Johnson

Paula R. Golombek

Shifting views of teachers' knowledge

What is knowledge, and who holds it? The answers to these deceptively simple questions reside at the heart of debates in teaching and learning, and in teacher education in particular. Unfortunately, the traditional answer has been unsatisfying for many teachers. For more than a hundred years, teacher education has been based on the notion that knowledge about teaching and learning can be “transmitted” to teachers by others. In the knowledge transmission model, educational researchers, positioned as outsiders to classroom life, seek to quantify generalizable knowledge about what good teaching is and what good teachers do. Teachers have been viewed as objects of study rather than as knowing professionals or agents of change. Researchers have been privileged in that they create the knowledge, hold it, and bestow it upon teachers. Teachers have been marginalized in that they are told what they should know and how they should use that knowledge. Even though many teachers personally reject this model, most of them continue to work and learn under its powerful hold in teacher education programs and the schools where they teach.

Critics of the knowledge transmission model, although not new (Counts, 1935, reprint 1965), have argued that such a view of knowledge and knower is paternalistic (Goodson & Dowbiggin, 1991; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1988; Schön, 1983), decontextualized (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1983), and, hence, ineffectual (Woods, 1987). Since the early 1980s, ethnographic and second-order investigations of teachers practicing their work in actual classrooms have revealed teachers as constructing their own explanations of teaching and highlighted the messiness that is inherent in the ways in which teachers think about and carry out their work (Elbaz, 1983; Lampert, 1985). The bulk of this research argues that what teachers know about teaching is largely socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come. Furthermore, it argues that how teachers actually use their knowledge in classrooms is highly

interpretive, socially negotiated, and continually restructured within the classrooms and schools where teachers work (Bullough, 1989; Clandinin, 1986; Grossman, 1990). Such conceptualizations of teacher learning have parallels with sociocultural theories (Leont'ev, 1978; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978) that highlight the fundamentally social nature of cognition and learning. Others argue for parallels with theories of situated cognition, which maintain that knowledge entails lived practices, not just accumulated information (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such socially situated views of knowledge and knowing argue that the processes of learning are socially negotiated, constructed through experiences in and with the social practices associated with particular activities, in particular social contexts (Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Wenger, 1998).

When viewed from a socially situated perspective, teachers not only possess knowledge, they can also be creators of that knowledge. What teachers know and how they use their knowledge in classrooms are highly interpretative and contingent on knowledge of self, students, curricula, and setting. Teacher learning is understood as normative and lifelong, built of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and as members of communities of practice in the schools where they teach. Professional development emerges from a process of reshaping teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods, or materials on teachers.

It follows, then, that in order to recognize and document the activity of teacher learning and language teaching through the perspective of teachers, it is necessary to gather descriptive accounts of how teachers come to know their knowledge, how they use that knowledge within the contexts where they teach, and how they make sense of and reconfigure their classroom practices in and over time. Since the early 1990s, the reflective teaching movement (Lockhart & Richards, 1994; Schön, 1983, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996), the predominance of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff, 1993; Somekh, 1993), and the teacher research movement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Edge & Richards, 1998; Freeman, 1998) have helped to establish the legitimacy of teachers' experiences and the importance of reflection on and inquiry into those experiences as a mechanism for change in teachers' classroom practices as well as a forum for professional development over time.

Already well established in general educational research, "teachers' ways of knowing" have recently been referred to as the *new scholarship* (Schön, 1995; Zeichner, 1999) or *practitioner research* (Anderson & Herr, 1999).

This new scholarship includes an ongoing struggle to articulate an epistemology of practice that characterizes teachers as legitimate knowers, as producers of legitimate knowledge, and as capable of constructing and sustaining their own professional development over time. The inclusion of a broader epistemological frame reflects a broad-based movement among school professionals to legitimize knowledge produced out of their own lived realities as professionals. Such work has the potential to fundamentally alter “outsider” or “objective researcher” knowledge, upon which the traditional knowledge base of teacher education is founded, by infusing it with “insider” knowledge: the complex and multilayered understandings of learners, culture, class, gender, literacy, social issues, institutions, communities, and curricula that teachers possess as natives to the settings in which they work (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1998).

Much of this new scholarship has been aligned with inquiry-based methods, such as critical, feminist, and reconstructionist approaches to pedagogy and curriculum (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Fundamental to these approaches is posing questions, questions that emerge from and are studied in teachers’ classrooms. Public recognition of the new scholarship has the emancipatory potential of transforming schools and changing equations of power and control in order to create more equitable social relations between university-generated research and teacher research, and to permit the growth of teachers’ personal and professional knowledge and thereby enhance their lifelong professional development.

A compelling example of this new scholarship is the line of research carried out by Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1995, 2000), in which they view re-storying experiences as essential to teachers’ personal and social growth. Their research relies on data that are generated by researcher observation, participant observation, and observations by other participants; the resulting stories are jointly constructed as teachers re-story their experience and researchers offer narrative interpretations based on teachers’ stories. In their most recent work, they argue that the value of narrative inquiry lies in its capacity to capture and describe experiences as they occur “in the midst” (2000, p. 63) of other lived experiences, to look *inward*, *outward*, *backward*, and *forward* at teachers’ experiences in order to capture their temporal nature and their personal and social dimensions, and to see them as situated within the places or sequences of places in which they occur and from which they emerge. Narrative inquiry, then, has the potential to create a “new sense of meaning and significance” (p. 42) for teachers’ experiences and thus brings new meaning and significance to the work of teachers within their own professional landscapes.

Although the new scholarship centers on teachers' experiences, in the bulk of this published work, teachers' voices are validated through the collaborations and interpretation of researchers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Golombek, 1998). Although such work is informative for the field as it struggles to articulate an epistemology of practice, Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) suggest that systematic inquiry *of* teachers *by* teachers can generate both individual and public knowledge about teaching. Furthermore, having teachers articulate their knowledge and practice in their own voices is one way to respond to calls for the validation of local forms of knowledge (Edge & Richards, 1998; Pennycook, 1989). The end goal of such an endeavor is, of course, the documentation, articulation, and public recognition of teachers' ways of knowing as legitimate knowledge, knowledge that can rightfully stand alongside the disciplinary knowledge that has dominated the traditional knowledge base of language teacher education (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

Narrative inquiry

We ground our conceptualization of narrative inquiry in Dewey's (1916, 1920, 1933) educational philosophy, which, at its core, argues that we are all knowers who reflect on experience, confront the unknown, make sense of it, and take action. However, not all experiences are informative in that some develop from what Dewey called *habit*, or to make use of an experience to take similar action repeatedly. Rather, inquiry into experience that is educative propels us to not only question the immediate context but to draw connections among experiences – what Dewey calls *continuity of experience* (1938), or how experiences change the conditions under which new experiences are understood so that a person's abilities, desires, and attitudes are changed. Inquiry into experience, in this sense, can be educative if it enables us to reflect on our actions and then act with foresight.

Yet, how we reflect on experience and how we make sense of our experience are often achieved through the stories we tell. Narrative has been constructed as a mode of thinking (Bruner, 1996) and as particularly valuable for representing the richness of human experiences. Through narratives, human beings play an active role in constructing their own lives (Mead, 1977), seeking to make sense of their experiences by imposing order on those experiences (Sarbin, 1986) and by seeing the self as constituted as a story (Bakhtin, 1981). Not surprisingly, narrative has been placed center stage in teacher education as both a method in and an object of inquiry

(Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Elbaz, 1983; Witherall & Noddings, 1991).

Yet narratives are not simply stories of individuals moving through and reflecting on experiences in isolation. Narratives, by their very nature, are social and relational and gain their meaning from our collective social histories. Therefore, narratives cannot be separated from the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts from which they emerged. Instead, they are deeply embedded in sociohistorical discourses (Gee, 1999) and thus represent a socially mediated view of experience. For example, when teachers describe a learner as “disadvantaged” or a classroom activity as “successful,” such depictions are not neutral but are embedded within sociocultural and sociohistorical notions of what it means to be disadvantaged in a particular society or what constitutes success in a particular educational system. Thus, narrative inquiry allows individuals to look at themselves and their activities as socially and historically situated.

Besides recognizing the social and relational dimensions of narrative inquiry, Dewey’s (1933) notion of inquiry into experience as intelligence is not simply cognitive but also moral. Witherall and Noddings (1991) note that “stories represent a journey into the realm of practical ethics” (p. 4). Thus, because classroom dilemmas often serve as catalysts for inquiry, teachers’ narratives embody emotions such as frustration, fear, anger, and joy, and they center on the caring emotions and actions of trust, dialogue, feelings, and responding (Noddings, 1984) that permeate the activity of teaching. Likewise, when teachers reflect on, describe, and analyze the factors contributing to a classroom dilemma, they confront their emotions, their moral beliefs, and the consequences of their teaching practices on the students they teach.

In order to make an experience educative, teachers need to approach narrative inquiry not as a set of prescriptive skills or tasks to be carried out but rather as a mind-set – a set of attitudes, what Dewey (1933) called *open-mindedness* (seeking alternatives), *responsibility* (recognizing consequences), and *wholeheartedness* (continual self-examination). When teachers inquire into their experience from this mind-set, they individually and collectively question their own assumptions as they uncover who they are, where they have come from, what they know and believe, and why they teach as they do. Through such inquiry, teachers recognize the consequences of their beliefs, knowledge, and experiences on what and how they teach. They recognize who their students are, where their students have come from, what their students know, and what their students need to know. Through inquiry, teachers question the taken-for-granted definitions of what is and is not possible within the contexts in which they teach. They ask the broader questions of not just whether their practices work but for whom, in what

ways, and why. Through inquiry, teachers frame and reframe the issues and problems they face in their professional worlds. As teachers engage in narrative inquiry, they become theorizers in their own right, and as theorizers, they look less for certain answers and more to rethink what they thought they already knew. Thus, we believe that teachers' stories of inquiry are not only *about* professional development; they *are* professional development. Narrative inquiry becomes a means through which teachers actualize their ways of knowing and growing that nourish and sustain their professional development throughout their careers.

Narrative inquiry as professional development

We advance a conceptualization of narrative inquiry as systematic exploration that is conducted *by* teachers and *for* teachers through their own stories and language. We believe that narrative inquiry, conducted by teachers individually or collaboratively, tells the stories of teachers' professional development within their own professional worlds. Such inquiry is driven by teachers' inner desire to understand that experience, to reconcile what is known with that which is hidden, to confirm and affirm, and to construct and reconstruct understandings of themselves as teachers and of their own teaching. What teachers choose to inquire about emerges from their personalities, their emotions, their ethics, their contexts, and their overwhelming concern for their students.

Our view of narrative inquiry as professional development reflects Dewey's (1920) claim that inquiry takes into account:

observation of the detailed makeup of the situation; analysis into its diverse factors; clarification of what is obscure; discounting of the more insistent and vivid traits; tracing the consequences of the various modes of action that suggest themselves; regarding the decision reached as hypothetical and tentative until the anticipated or supposed consequences which led to its adoption have been squared with actual consequences. This inquiry is intelligence. (p. 164)

Thus, inquiry into experience enables teachers to describe the complexities of their practice while stepping back from the hermeneutical processes in which they normally engage. This process of stepping back, description, reflection, and analysis becomes a kind of articulation (Freeman, 1991) or a process through which teachers link and clarify tensions that seem, at first glance, to have no relationship to one another. However, when teachers inquire into their own experiences, such inquiry propels them to question and reinterpret their ways of knowing. Inquiry into experience enables teachers

to act with foresight. It gives them increasing control over their thoughts and actions; grants their experiences enriched, deepened meaning; and enables them to be more thoughtful and mindful of their work.

We believe that narrative inquiry enables teachers to organize, articulate, and communicate what they know and believe about teaching and who they have become as teachers. Their stories reveal the knowledge, ideas, perspectives, understandings, and experiences that guide their work. Their stories describe the complexities of their practice, trace professional development over time, and reveal the ways in which they make sense of and reconfigure their work. Their stories reflect the struggles, tensions, triumphs, and rewards of their lives as teachers. We believe that, ultimately, narrative inquiry enables teachers not only to make sense of their professional worlds but also to make significant and worthwhile change within themselves and in their teaching practices.

Teachers who engage in narrative inquiry do not look for simple answers or quick solutions but theorize about their work as they organize, articulate, and communicate what they have come to understand about themselves and the activity of teaching. This is critically important, for teachers often view theory, crafted in the language of the theorist, as a finished product about which they have no right to negotiate (Shor & Freire, 1987). Whereas most researchers frame their inquiry within a review of existing theory and research, teachers tend to frame their inquiry within their experiences, often interweaving their understandings of theory and research throughout. In doing so, teachers theorize in language they feel comfortable using, whether it be narrative descriptions, recounting of specific events, depictions of visual images, metaphors that weave their life stories together, or references to and from theory and research. Their narratives reveal, and allow them to reflect on, their perspectives, understandings, and experiences that guide their conceptions of teaching and their practice and that simultaneously change how they make sense of new experiences. Their narratives often integrate personal and professional worlds in ways that university researchers view as “subjective”; yet it is precisely this integration of the personal and professional that can inform in authentic ways. Their stories are not abstract theory but represent “knowing-in-action” (Schön, 1983) and the dialectical relationship between theory and practice (Clarke, 1994; Edge & Richards, 1998).

Moreover, teachers’ theorizing is not linear but, rather, reflects a dynamic interplay between description, reflection, dialogue with self and others, and the implementation of alternative teaching practices. The particular mechanism through which teachers theorize is varied, for example, systematic journaling; continuous reflection; dialogue with others; finding patterns,

metaphors, or images as experiences are restored, and through classroom- and community-based research.

Finally, such theorizing does not necessarily lead to “happy endings.” As Edge and Richards (1998) suggest, “dialogues of doubt can be at least as important as the dictates of success, for whereas the former hold out the prospect of development for the sake of improvement, the latter imply that the destination is already decided” (p. 571). At times, teachers try out alternatives that fail, and in that failure, they may or may not recognize more appropriate ways to respond. At times, teachers gain insights into themselves, their students, and their context, and yet fall short of the instructional practices that embody those insights. Inquiry promotes theorizing; yet it captures only moments in teachers’ evolving knowledge about themselves and their teaching. We can expect this knowledge, through narrative inquiry, theorizing, and the retelling of stories, to change and grow throughout teachers’ professional lives.

The role of theoretical knowledge

Expanding the knowledge base of second language teacher education to acknowledge teachers as learners of teaching and their tacit understandings of the activities of teaching itself does not preclude disciplinary or theoretical knowledge from remaining foundational to the knowledge base of second language teacher education. On the contrary, knowledge of how language is structured, acquired, and used remains fundamental to our understandings of language learning and the activity of language teaching. However, when teacher learning is viewed from a socially situated perspective, it follows that teachers need multiple opportunities to examine the theoretical knowledge they are exposed to in their professional development opportunities within the familiar context of their own learning and teaching experiences. For the purposes of educating language teachers, any theory of second language acquisition, any classroom methodology, or any description of the English language as subject matter must be understood against the backdrop of teachers’ professional lives, within the settings where they work, and within the circumstances of that work. When theoretical knowledge is situated within the social contexts where it is to be used, when the interconnectedness of that knowledge is made obvious, and when language teachers have multiple opportunities to use that knowledge in interpretative ways, then theoretical knowledge has relevance for practice. This process of sense making that teachers engage in empowers them to construct justifications for their practices that are grounded in the theories that they understand

and act upon within the complex landscapes in which they work (Johnson, 1996).

Reading this book

What you are about to read are highly personal, highly contextualized stories of teachers inquiring into their own experiences as learners of language teaching. These teachers speak, listen, and respond thoughtfully, carefully, and with professional insight. As you read their stories of inquiry, it becomes obvious that although all these stories emerge from the self, they are fundamentally relational, encompassing the complex social relationships that exist in language teachers' professional worlds. Thus, in each story you will gain a sense of the tangled web of teachers, students, curricula, teaching practices, fellow teachers, administrators, local communities, and theory and research. But as you read on, in each story of inquiry, one dimension seems to be in the forefront. We have, therefore, organized the contributions in this book according to what we feel emerges as center stage.

- Part I, Inquiry into Instructional Practices
- Part II, Inquiry into Language Learners
- Part III, Inquiry into Language Teachers
- Part IV, Inquiry through Professional Collaborations

We recognize that the stories in this collection come from various regions of the world and are written by teachers who have a range of life experiences in different instructional settings. And although not all regions of the world or all types of instructional settings could ever be represented in a single volume, we believe that the stories presented here will resonate with language teachers around the world. The demands of teaching under an exam-driven curriculum, the challenges of giving students' voice in the classroom, the difficulties of recognizing one's limitations as a teacher, and the dilemmas of evaluating student learning cut across regional and instructional boundaries. We suspect that readers will see pieces of themselves or aspects of their professional worlds embedded in these stories of inquiry regardless of the settings from which they have emerged.

And although we have been moved in our own professional thinking by these teachers' stories, their stories are not *the* story. We recognize that narrative inquiry is not the panacea that will miraculously sort out the complexities of preparing language teachers for the work of this profession. We are not proposing that narrative inquiry replace one dominant paradigm with another. We share Carter's (1993) concern not to "sanctify

storytelling work” (p. 11), and we recognize that teachers’ desire to create a coherent life story out of narratives can be misleading (Johnston, 1997). However, we argue that the objectives of narrative inquiry are many and, thus, do not represent a singular ideological stance. Narrative inquiry is diverse in the changes it seeks to bring about, such as personal and professional growth, empowerment of teachers to change their situations, an epistemological shift, and a change in the relationship between teachers, researchers, and theory. At the same time, we believe that narrative inquiry can provide a transformative quality in teachers’ personal and professional lives and in teacher education itself.

As you read these teachers’ stories of inquiry, we hope that their stories will prompt you to recall, rethink, and reconstruct your own ways of knowing about language teachers and language teaching. We encourage you to recognize the many ways teachers use to examine themselves and their teaching and to develop alternative conceptions of teaching and alternative instructional practices. Note the ways that teachers acknowledge the consequences of their beliefs and practice on themselves and on their students. We intend for this book to be a “readerly text” (Elbow, 1981), in other words, that it create opportunity and space for you to construct your own meaning and rethink your own understandings of teachers, teaching, and teacher learning. We encourage you to look for multiple interpretations and multiple layers of meaning in these stories and, we hope, change our collective perceptions of what counts as knowledge, who is considered a knower, and what counts as professional development.

Conclusion

In this book, teachers’ stories of inquiry are a journey of *how* they know as well as *what* they know. Yet, in language teacher education, there are few professional forums that make teachers’ ways of knowing public. The intent of this collection is to bring teachers’ ways of knowing into our professional conversations so as to transform our understandings of language teachers and language teaching. By making teachers’ ways of knowing public, open to review by others, and accessible to others in the profession, we hope to validate language teachers and the activity of language teaching in ways afforded to other forms of scholarly work. We hope that this collection will transcend the traditional theory-practice dichotomy that has denied teachers’ role as theorizers – in essence, allowing teachers to reclaim their own professional development. By making teachers’ stories of inquiry public,

narrative inquiry stands to become a legitimate and, we hope, a common means of professional development in language teacher education.

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